

## Gender, actors and institutions at the local level

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DOI:

[10.1111/gove.12329](https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12329)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Lowndes, V & Gains, F 2018, 'Gender, actors and institutions at the local level: explaining variation in policies to address violence against women and girls ', *Governance*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 683-699.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12329>

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# **Gender, Actors and Institutions at the Local Level: Explaining Variation in Policies to Address Violence against Women and Girls**

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Accepted for publication in *Governance*, 16 October 2017

DOI:10.1111/gove.12329

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to Ros Southern and Matt Crow for research assistance and to the European Research Council for funding (Understanding Institutional Change: A Gender Perspective, Georgina Waylen PI). Thanks also to our three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

## **Abstract**

Research on gender equality policy has generally focused on actors and institutions at the national and international levels. This paper considers the role of local level actors and institutions in explaining different policy responses to violence against women and girls (VAWG). The literature on gender policy trajectories identifies the particular importance of executive actors in influencing 'status policies' like VAWG. Quantitative data is analyzed to show how local Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales have responded to demands for policy action. The focus is on the interaction between the 41 elected commissioners and the new institutional arrangements for police governance introduced in 2012. The paper shows that variation in policy outcomes is related (a) to the gender of executive actors, and (b) to the way in which actors interpret elements of the institutional framework, regardless of their own gender.

## Introduction

Research on politics and gender has examined the determinants of policy change to achieve gender equality (Lovenduski, 2005; Mazur and Pollack, 2009; Gains and Lowndes, 2014). The focus has been on the role of women's movements in provoking change (Weldon, 2002; Montaya, 2009; Abrar, 1996; Htun and Weldon, 2012), alongside female representatives, executive actors and 'femocrats' (Annesley et al, 2015; Banaszak, 2010; Holli, 2008). More recently, feminist institutionalism has argued for the need to appreciate the way in which institutions, understood to be rules-in-use, structure advocacy and processes of policy reform across a range of venues. It is argued that a focus on both actors and institutions, and the way in which actors operate in rule bound settings, can elucidate the dynamics of gender equality policy reform (Krook and Mackay, 2011; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Waylen, 2014; Raymond et al, 2014).

Drawing on insights from public policy scholarship, research has also underlined the heterodoxy of policy change for different types of gender equality reform, pointing to a distinction between 'class based' and 'status based' policies (Htun and Weldon, 2010). The presence of critical actors in executive positions has been found to be especially important in getting status based issues, like violence against women and girls (VAWG), on government agendas (Annesley et al, 2015). This article investigates further the determinants of policy change. It argues that, as well as recognizing heterodoxy in policy type, it is also necessary to analyze *where* critical actors with executive authority are located within multi-level institutional arrangements. Existing scholarship on gender equality reforms has focused primarily on actors at the national and international levels, although there is work on states and provinces within federal systems (Chappell, 2002; Chappell and Curtin, 2013; Haussman et al, 2010). This still leaves a gap in our understanding of the role of executive actors at the level of municipal or local governance. The article argues that such local-level executive actors play an important role in deciding whether or not to prioritize policies to tackle VAWG, and seeks to explain this variation. By focusing on local actors and their interaction with local institutions, we can better understand the determinants of variation in gender policy outcomes.

To examine the institutional shaping of gender equality policy at the local level, we investigate how local Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales have responded to demands for policy action to tackle VAWG emanating from both national government and local lobbying groups. Seeking to extend the analytical and methodological purchase of feminist institutionalism, we set out a framework to show the relationship between policy stimuli, gendered institutional rules and gendered actors in influencing gendered outcomes. We use this framework to examine the relative

importance of equalities duties (rules) and the gender of Police and Crime Commissioners (actors) in getting VAWG onto local policy agendas. Findings demonstrate that variability in policy outcomes (i.e. the prioritization of measures to tackle VAWG) is linked to actors' own gender but also to the different ways in which actors engage with elements of the local institutional framework, notably gender equality duties. In conclusion, we argue for an appreciation of the way in which institutional arrangements at the local level, and their interpretation by local decision makers, can shape gender equality policy reform. Cross-nationally, governance structures may accord more or less decision making authority to local actors in respect of gender equality, but researchers need to establish where it is that the relevant critical actors sit within multi-level systems for specific categories of policy. Our findings in respect of local police governance in England and Wales provide a reference point for further research on the local level framing of status based gender equality reforms, while also showing how key variables can be operationalized and measured.

### **Actors and Institutions in Gender Equality Policy Reform**

Research on the determinants of policy change to achieve gender equality has focused on a number of key issues: the transmission of ideas for reform through international norms and agreements (Raymond, Weldon et al 2014; Friedman, 2013); the link between improved female political representation and substantive policy action (Celis et al, 2008; Annesley and Gains, 2010; Atchison and Down, 2009;) and the role of 'femocrats' (working in women's policy agencies and other bureaucratic settings) in supporting reform inside government (Stetson and Mazur, 1995; Sawyer, 2003; Banaszak, 2010; Andrews and Miller, 2013). Scholarship has foregrounded the role, in particular policy venues, of civil society actors, political representatives and bureaucratic actors – what Ortobals et al (2013) call the 'triangle of empowerment'.

Feminist institutionalism has sought to generate theoretical propositions that can be applied and explored across specific cases. Where March and Olsen (1984) argued that 'the organization of political life makes a difference', feminist institutionalists hold that the *gendered* organization of political life matters. Institutions, understood as the formal and informal 'rules of the game', structure the allocation of roles and resources, and convey embedded norms and rules about the possibilities for political action. Feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the way in which these institutional arrangements are gendered (Krook and Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2011; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Gains and Lowndes, 2014). Jill Vickers (2013, 1) draws attention to the two-way nature of this relationship, arguing that 'gender makes the state' (through the influence of societal norms and power relationships) whilst 'the state makes gender' (through the reproduction, amplification even, of these norms through state programs and policies). The relationship between

gendered organization and gendered outcomes is an iterative one, with outcomes shaping expectations about organization, as well as vice versa. Building on earlier feminist scholarship that examined the role of gender in political organizations (Lovenduski, 1998; Acker, 1990; Beckwith, 1992), feminist institutionalism draws attention to the difficulty of changing gendered institutional rules, the conditions under which change might occur, and strategies for embedding new norms and rules. McBride and Mazur (2010) distinguish between the gendered nature of policy processes (the level of inclusion of equality advocates) and of policy contents (the relative success of feminist framing of problems). Gendered outcomes, such as an increase in policies encouraging female representation, can also be seen as determining variables for the progress of policy reform. Gender therefore can be implicated as both a dependent and an independent variable in explaining processes of institutional reform. Responding to this challenge, Gains and Lowndes (2014) argue that research should distinguish between four different dimensions, whilst also analyzing their interaction: rules about gender, rules with gendered effects, gendered actors working with rules, and gendered policy outcomes. The challenge is to identify, and measure, the micro-foundations upon which the gendered character of political institutions is built.

Another strand of gender and policy scholarship draws attention to the heterogeneity of gender equality policies and the associated reform processes (Mazur, 2002). Policies designed to achieve gender equality encompass a range of policy types. Some policies are aimed at supporting women in the workplace, such as childcare and maternity benefits, and policies ensuring equal rights in terms of pay and pension entitlements. These are termed 'class policies' by Htun and Weldon (2010), who see them as facilitating women's economic integration (in the context of unpaid work in the home), aiming to ensure that all women, not just rich women, are able to access and benefit from paid employment. Other policy areas, however, directly address women's bodily integrity, such as women's health issues like breast cancer, abortion rights and reproductive rights. Policies addressing bodily integrity also include those addressing violence against women in all its manifestations including domestic violence, trafficking and sexual harassment. Htun and Weldon (2010) refer to these as 'status policies' because they address the subordinate status of women as a group.

To understand better the different determinants of gender equality policies, Htun and Weldon's class/status distinction (which builds upon the work of an earlier generation of comparative feminist scholars like Norris, 1987, and Yishai, 1993) can be combined with insights from the agenda setting literature (Baumgartner et al, 2006). Research has examined the problem of when national governments 'pay serious attention' (Kindgon, 1984) to gender equality reforms in five European

countries (Annesley et al, 2015). Recognizing that gender equality reform is not a core issue on governmental agendas, the research investigates the conditions under which gender equality reaches critical decision agendas. It is found that, for class based gender equality reform, the presence of strong left parties is important, for example in relation to extending rights already granted to male employees such as equal pay and pension rights. The presence of women in legislatures is linked is also linked to class based gender equality policies, including parental leave and childcare. Status based gender equality policies, on the other hand, can provoke doctrinal resistance in some contexts as these types of policies may challenge deep-seated religious and cultural norms. In these settings, feminist mobilization in civil society is found to account for variation in policy development (Htun and Weldon 2012). However, status based policies are also linked to both social democratic and liberal ideals; indeed, Chappell and Curtin (2013) find that policy change in this area can be led by right and left parties. Getting status based issues, such as violence against women, on government decision agendas is, however, more likely when women are in *executive roles*, suggesting that the advocacy of critical actors is key for measures that may provoke doctrinal resistance (Annesley et al, 2015). Thus existing research on the determinants of gender equality policy reforms focuses on the way in which gendered actors operate in different institutional settings to progress (or not) a heterogeneous set of policy issues.

Whether looking at single gender equality policy or a range of policy areas, the vast majority of research has focused on the international or national level of analysis. Addressing a gap in the literature, this article focuses on the local or municipal level of government, and argues that policy prioritization in favor of gender equality needs to be understood in the context of multi-level relationships. In relation to VAWG, both Roggeband's (2016) Latin American research and work on East/Central Europe (Krizsan and Popa, 2014) challenge linear and mechanistic model of norm diffusion from the international to the national arena, showing the importance of multi-level and multi-directional relationships. Below the level of the nation state, there is an emerging body of literature on federalism and meso-level government, which considers whether federal arrangements afford greater access to gender equality advocates, and more opportunities for policy innovation and learning, in comparison with unitary systems (Haussman et al, 2010; Vickers, 2013). In the case of VAWG, Chappell and Curtin (2013) find limited support for this contention when comparing Australia and New Zealand. Findings from their three country study lead Ortals et al (2013) to counter any assumption that women have more of an 'affinity' with meso-level legislatures because they are 'closer to home'. Access relies as much at this level as any other upon the character of the relationship between activists, bureaucrats and political representatives. As Chappell (2002) points

out, there is a 'conditional' relationship between institutional, agential and contextual factors, with federal systems not necessarily being more conducive to gender reform.

This article explores these conditional relationships at a lower level still, that of municipal or local or government, where little is known about the conditions under which gender equality policies are prioritized (or not). The importance of research at the local level lies not just in getting a more complete picture of the multi-level institutional environment for gender equality reform. Insights from public policy literature show that the broad intentions of policy makers at national level are generally interpreted and applied in different ways through local decision making processes (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). Policy is only really 'made' when it is brought to life by local actors, who are charged with adapting overarching policy statements to local contexts, resource bases, political sensibilities, and previous policy legacies. The 'agential' turn in institutionalist theory has argued that the way in which actors interpret institutional precepts is central to explaining how institutions change over time, reflecting the demands of changing contexts but also the strategic interests of individual or collective actors). Our research does not look at implementation in the sense of the service or policy delivery; rather, it focuses on the determinants on policy prioritization at the local level. As such, we take up Laurel Weldon's (2002, 5, 20) plea that research on gender equality reform "should focus more attention on variation in the structure of public administration", while exploring her specific contention that the study of "local government and sub-government is critical to the complete understanding of gender and public policy." We investigate the role of local executive actors, working with local governance institutions, in explaining why VAWG policies are prioritized in some localities and not in others, despite common policy frameworks operating at 'higher' levels. Such insights could potentially influence interventions to push VAWG up local policy agendas.

To address the gaps in the literature and evidence base, we examine the institution of directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales, established in 2012. These new actors are charged with putting into practice national legislation and policy agendas by developing strategies, services and monitoring arrangements for VAWG. Considering an institution in formation allows us to investigate the proposition in the literature that institutional change opens up opportunities for gender equality reforms (Mackay, 2008, 130). As Celis et al (2013, 46) ask, can progressive elements be 'locked in' at a time when structures and underpinning values are being negotiated? It is possible that the directly elected Commissioners could over time become new critical actors in favor of gender equality, while their offices could also provide new arenas for femocrats and a new access point for women's movement organizations. The article investigates



variation in PCCs' gender equality policies (focusing on VAWG) and seeks to relate these to key institutional and agential variables.

### **Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales**

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were first elected in November 2012 following the enactment of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2012. Elections were held in 41 police force areas across England and Wales; these are metropolitan or sub-regional areas that cover more than one elected local government unit. Police governance was previously the responsibility of nominated Police Committees made up of councilors from the constituent local authorities. Directly elected Commissioners, however, are formally independent of elected local government. PCCs are supported by a Deputy and small office, while local government councilors serve on scrutiny panels that review Commissioners' policies and performance (Police and Crime Panels). Panels are also able to co-opt members from the community and voluntary sectors, the magistracy and probation service. The creation of a directly elected public official, overseeing the work of local policing, is not only new but also unusual in a UK political landscape that has no tradition of presidential or mayoral elections. The new institutional arrangements were intended to increase the accountability of police governance by having a clearly identifiable individual office-holder, subject to direct election by the public on a four-year cycle. The change was part of a more general commitment by the incoming 2010 Coalition Government to encourage democratic engagement in local decision-making (Green, 2012). The model was inspired by the role played in various US cities (notably New York) by a single elected official "with clear responsibility for policing matters – someone who can be held accountable by the electorate for police performance" (Newburn, 2012, 40), but also differed from American models by according that responsibility to a police-specific elected official rather than a city mayor.

While not able to interfere directly in operational policing decisions, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) set the police and crime priorities for the area they serve (and are responsible for appointing, and dismissing, the operational head of police – the Chief Constable). Policy priorities, published annually in a Police and Crime Plan, must reflect consultation with the public locally and also take account of the UK Home Secretary's strategic policing requirements (issues deemed to have national significance). To support the priorities identified in the Police and Crime Plan, PCCs can allocate funds for specific projects and also commission Crime and Disorder Partnerships (which include local councilors and the third sector) to provide ancillary services (e.g. research, good practice pilots, public consultations). It is these new PCCs, therefore, who have executive decision-making authority in deciding which policies to prioritize (Lister and Rowe, 2015).

Many of the new PCCs had served on the previous Police Committees or worked in the police force itself or in the criminal justice system, while others came from a social work or business background. The old Police Committees did not have the same agenda setting or resource allocation powers as the new PCCs or the legitimacy which flows from their separate electoral mandate. New institutional rules govern the election and duties of the commissioners, their relationships with other criminal justice actors and the scrutiny of their work, but they are also influenced by the ongoing national oversight of the UK Home Secretary and the longstanding traditions of their local police forces and the elected local authorities with whom they have to work (on crime prevention, for instance).

An examination of the PCC institution is highly relevant for an exploration of how the gendered organization of political life makes a difference. First, policing is traditionally a very male environment (Westmarland, 2002); the great majority of actors with leadership roles in the police services are men (Tickle, 2012). Indeed, of the first tranche of forty one PCCs elected in 2012, only six were women. Second, the incidence, experience, reporting of and impact of crime is highly gendered with longstanding gender differences in rates of criminal engagement, victimhood and arrest (reflecting the international picture reported by UN Women, 2011). Home Office statistics show that, in 2012, “1.2 million women suffered domestic abuse, over 400,000 women were sexually assaulted, 70,000 women were raped and thousands more were stalked” (Home Office, 2013a). Men and boys can and do also suffer gendered violence, but most gendered violence involved male perpetrators and female victims (Home Office 2011: 1). Third, reducing violence against women and girls is one of the policing areas considered to require a national strategy and a nationally coordinated operational response (Home Office, 2012).

Acknowledging the need for a localized response, PCCs are expected to respond to the national agenda while also having the power to set local priorities and disburse funds to support these priorities, for example by funding alternatives to criminal justice approaches, supporting victims, and demanding action on the level and funding of specialized VAWG officers. The guidance for PCCs from the Home Secretary states: “VAWG is not a problem that can be resolved with national action alone; it needs concerted, joined-up working at a local level” (Home Office 2013b). Both the main political parties also have national policy positions strongly supportive of the need to take action against VAWG. Top down pressure for action to be taken on violence against women has been maintained through the publication of a critical national report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (2014) on police responses to domestic abuse. In short, a constant factor throughout the three years of our analysis was top down pressure for implementation of policies to address

VAWG adopted at national level. As well as this top down pressure, all PCC candidates were lobbied extensively in their localities by the Women's Aid Federation of England on behalf of a national network of domestic and sexual violence services (Women's Aid, 2012).

However, at the local level, examining how PCCs have responded to the problem of violence against women and girls presents an empirical and analytical puzzle. Our initial analysis of the policy priorities of the PCCs taken from their websites and manifesto statements at the time of their election shows that, despite pressure to address the problem of VAWG both from the National Home Secretary and from local campaigners, only six of the 41 Commissioners mention violence against women and girls and only six mention domestic violence as one of their priorities (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, 2012a). Seeking to explain why policy prioritization varies across England and Wales, we examine the gendered dimensions of how these new actors are working with new institutional rules.

### **Investigating Local Gender Equality Policy Reform**

Elsewhere we have argued for a clarification of the dimensions under scrutiny when seeking to explain gendered policy outcomes (Gains and Lowndes, 2014). This article analyses the interaction of actors and institutions, and the effects of this interaction on outcomes. We seek to specify and measure these different factors. First, we look at *rules about gender*, which set out roles, actions or benefits that affect women and men differentially. These rules about gender can be both positive, for example recent commitments in the UK political parties for gender balanced cabinet representation (Annesley and Gains, 2014). Equally, rules about gender can be negative such as historic rules about the rights of married women to continue in employment, or penalties associated with pension entitlements. Second, we consider the separate dimension of *gendered actors working with rules*. Political actors design, enact and interpret institutional rules; moreover, they are inevitably gendered actors who reflect a range of intersectional identities. It is important to analyze the relationship between gendered actors and institutional rules, some of which are specifically 'about gender'. Thus scholars have examined the 'politics of presence' and the relationship that is often assumed between the descriptive and substantive representation of women (Phillips, 1995). Progress in gender equality policy is found to relate not only to the presence of women in legislatures and executives, but also to the role of individual male 'critical actors' (Childs and Krook, 2009) and the collective contribution of networks of activists (Weldon, 2004). In arguing for a 'thick' conception of the substantive representation of women, Fiona Mackay (2008, 135) argues that it is not possible to 'fix' in advance which category of actors, and which institutional arenas, are most significant. Rather, the 'critical actors, sites and dynamics' can only be traced over time and within

specific contexts. In this spirit, we focus upon a generally neglected site – municipal governance – and investigate the role of one set of executive actors (PCCs) in contexts characterized by institutional legacies (from the previous police governance arrangements) and institutional interactions (with national policy frameworks, elected local authorities and local women's movements).

It is clear that gender can be considered as both a dependent and an independent variable – implicated in the outcomes we seek to explain and also the explanatory factors we are investigating. Hence, we need research strategies that are able to address questions of causation in a way that recognizes iterative relationships and issues of sequencing over time (as shown in Figure 1). As Chappell and Mackay (2017) observe, more parsimonious models “often obscure rather than illuminate gender”, finding it difficult to capture the “mesiness” of real work world scenarios.” But seeking to clarify relationships between actors, rules and outcomes – within specific contexts – is necessary to build an understanding of complex processes of gendered institutional change. It also has important policy implications in terms of identifying points of intervention to support gender equality policy making.

*Figure 1 about here*

We use this framework to consider how gendered outcomes are linked to institutional rules about gender and to gendered actors who work with rules. We ask how important these two sets of factors are in explaining variation in policy outcomes and set out our propositions below. The analysis is restricted to a consideration of formal rules, which can be identified and assessed using quantitative measures. [For an initial analysis of the role of informal rules in this case study, using qualitative research, see Gains and Lowndes (2016), and for a wider consideration of the role informal institutions play in gendering political behavior and outcome, see Waylen's (2017) collection of essays.]

### **Linking 'Rules about Gender' and Gendered Outcomes**

The most relevant 'rules about gender' for our case are those rules whose specific purpose is to promote gender equality, as embodied in the 2010 Equalities Act. The legislation introduces 'equalities duties' for all public officials which are designed to 'mainstream' policy making ensuring the consideration of gender differences (and other diversity issues) when looking at policy delivery and new policy proposals (Council of Europe, 1998; Verloo, 2005). The UK's equalities duties give all public sector bodies, including the new PCCs, an overarching duty to get rid of unlawful

discrimination and harassment and to promote equal opportunities. To fulfil this duty, the minimum requirement is for PCCs to make available data about equalities related to their office staffing (APPC, 2012b). PCCs must also explain to the Police and Crime Panel, which is charged with scrutinizing their work, how they are meeting these requirements, via their Annual Report (APCC, 2012b).

However, the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners advises a more expansive engagement with the public sector equality duty, proposing that PCCs should oversee the delivery of the more demanding equalities duties with which police Chief Constables' are charged. Responsible for operational policing, Chief Constables are required not just to publish staffing data, but also to publish equality objectives, and demonstrate that they have considered equalities implications in making decisions and formulating policies and practices. The literature suggests that the ability of PCCs to fulfil equalities duties in this more expansive manner is likely to be linked to the policy capacity of their office. The potential importance of such capacity in delivering gender equality is highlighted by McBride and Mazur (2010), who examine the role of women's policy agencies in the provision of policy advice and research. Women's policy agencies can provide research capacity, organize internal lobbying efforts, provide costings and other operational information to assist with the passage of legislative and institutional change. At the national level, Annesley and Gains (2010) show how the effectiveness of feminist ministers in the UK was increased over time by the establishment of a women's policy agency and the employment of special equality advisers. While PCCs inherited baseline staffing arrangements from the former police authorities (that supported the Police Committees), the new institutional arrangements allowed them to adapt these arrangements and/or employ staff with specific policy briefs.

We anticipate that the prioritization of policies aimed at reducing VAWG is likely to be linked to variations in how each PCC responds to their equalities duties, specifically to whether a more expansive stance is adopted. For example, if the PCC has employed an equalities adviser there will be a greater policy capacity to develop and promote measures to combat VAWG. And if a more expansive oversight of the Chief Constable's specific equalities duties has also been undertaken and reported on (which may or may not rely on the PCC's own policy capacity), we anticipate it is more likely that VAWG will be a policy priority. Our proposition therefore is that:

- *Where a full equalities assessment has been undertaken, and reported, PCCs are more likely to prioritize VAWG.*

## Linking 'Gendered Actors Working with Rules' and Gendered Outcomes

The link between improvements in the representation of women and policies for gender equality has been a central concern of the gender and politics literature (Lovenduski, 2005). Drawing on Pitkin's (1972) notion of substantive representation, recent scholarship has moved away from assuming an automatic link between increases in the descriptive representation of women (for example securing a 'critical mass' of women in legislatures) and policies to benefit women or gender equality. The assumption that women will automatically 'act for women' is problematized, with an acknowledgement that not all women will take this route and that male actors can also advocate for policies aimed at women or to improve gender equality. Recent literature focuses on the activities of 'critical actors' rather than assuming women will advocate for policy change (Childs and Krook, 2009). However, research findings consistently show improved outcomes for women where descriptive representation is improved, suggesting it is likely that at least some women political actors will seek to act for women either through pressurizing decision makers in executives or directly through legislative activity (Annesley et al, 2015). For status based policies, like VAWG, we noted earlier the importance of female executive actors, as these actors can access power resources to achieve policy change, often in the face of doctrinal resistance. The new Police and Crime Commissioners are able to claim political authority by being individually elected (albeit on a very small turnout), and they also control a sizeable budget and have the ability to set local priorities. The logic of the gender and representation literature leads us to a proposition that:

- *Female PCCs are more likely to make VAWG a policy priority.*

The literature on executive actors also suggests that there are several factors which can enhance the capacity of executive actors to achieve their goals, notably working with other actors who share their goals in a network of critical actors (Holli, 2008). In the UK, research shows the importance of New Labour feminist ministers networking with other female cabinet ministers and advisers to achieve their policy goals (Annesley, 2010). Examining the way in which local domestic violence policies were developed in three localities, Abrar (1996) draws attention to the importance of political support and also a strong local network of advocates, including support from women's officers in local authorities and the ability to bid for funding.

PCCs have two particularly close relationships in developing and achieving their policy priorities: with the Chief Constable for their locality, and with their Deputy PCC (whom they are empowered to appoint). Given the evidence in the literature about the importance of the gender of key supporting actors, our next proposition states that:

- *Where actors in the close network of the PCC (like the Chief Constable or the Deputy PCC) are female, PCCs are more likely to make VAWG a policy priority.*

### **Data and Methods**

To examine these propositions we drew on publicly available information on the background, activities and decisions of the PCCs. Data were recorded for each of the 41 PCCs in each of their first three years in office, using the measures explained below, which gave a total of 123 sets of observations. Biographical information was available through a data set compiled by the Police Federation ([http://www.polfed.org/fedatwork/police\\_and\\_crime\\_commissioners.aspx](http://www.polfed.org/fedatwork/police_and_crime_commissioners.aspx)) which showed gender, party, employment background and any previous political or civic experience. The 'Who's my PCC' website (sponsored by the Home Office) offered all 193 candidates, in each of the 41 areas holding elections, the chance to post a short 200 word manifesto setting out their priorities (<http://www.choosemypcc.org.uk>, accessed 25 January 2014). Once elected, the 41 successful PCCs all hosted websites providing details of their office arrangements and staffing, their consultation arrangements, and (once published) access to their Police and Crime Plans and Annual Reports. Data on the local Chief Constable and the composition of the Police and Crime Panels in each area (in terms of staffing and appointments) were taken from the websites for each organization respectively.

Our concern was to examine the relationship between the Commissioners as actors, the institutional rules which have emerged with the creation of the PCCs, and the gendered outcome of whether PCCs prioritized the issue of VAWG in their Police and Crime Plan. Each PCC faces competing demands as to which issues to prioritize in their local plan, as well as how to respond given the resources available. Prioritizing VAWG in the plan not only gives a political signal to the Chief Constable that this is an issue of concern, but is also likely to be associated with targeted funding for VAWG-related projects that offer support for victims or alternative treatments for offenders.<sup>i</sup>

The first annual Police and Crime Plans were very varied in the way in which information was presented and, in order to develop a robust indicator, different measures of what constituted a strong focus on VAWG were needed. Some Commissioners had a specific section on VAWG and mentions of VAWG were restricted to this section; this meant that they often only had a small number of 'mentions', but a clear focus on VAWG. Others did not split the Plan into sections but mentioned VAWG a large number of times throughout the Plan. To capture these differences and identify this outcome, we create a binary variable by examining three separate measures. First, for each locality we looked at whether VAWG was mentioned in each annual Plan; second, whether the

number of mentions was above the average number of mentions; and third, whether there was a specific section on VAWG in the Plan (or one of the associated crimes covered under this heading, such as domestic violence). This compound indicator led to a possible score of 0 – 3 and those PCC Plans which scored 2 or 3 were coded 1, whilst those with a score of 0 or 1 were coded 0 to create a variable 'VAWG a priority focus'. We found that, by this measure, 49% of the plans had a focus on VAWG as a priority (60 of the 123 observations).

To identify the influence of 'rules about gender', we created another compound indicator that examined three separate measures to assess the extent to which PCCs exercised their equalities duties. First, we noted (yes/no) whether each PCC mentioned their equalities duties in their plan. Second, we drew on information presented on PCC websites about their office staffing arrangements in order to identify whether the PCC employed an equalities adviser (or a dedicated domestic violence adviser) and therefore had a gender policy capacity. Finally, we examined whether the Annual Report commented on the incidence of VAWG in the locality, or the performance of the police in relation to VAWG. Scoring of these measures allowed us to create a binary variable where PCCs scoring 2 or 3 were coded as 'strongly' meeting their equalities duties in that year and PCCs scoring 0 or 1 were coded as 'weakly' meeting their equalities duties. According to this measure 45% provided full equalities reporting (55 of the 123 observations).

The gender of all relevant actors, including PCCs themselves, was taken from the Police Federation and PCC websites mentioned above. PCCs' party affiliation, or independent status, was also taken from these sources.

## **Research Findings**

In reporting our findings we note that our small N (123) means we are not seeking to identify statistical significance in our results; rather, we present descriptive statistics and report on the relative odds of support for our propositions. We consider how we might further develop our analysis of these relationships in our conclusions.

### **Rules about Gender**

Nearly two thirds of PCCs (62% or 76 of 123 observations) mentioned their specific responsibilities toward promoting gender equality under the Equalities Act in their plans. However only 15% (19) of PCCs employed either an equality policy adviser (or an adviser on VAWG), which would provide a gender policy capacity. Just over a half (56% or 69 of the 123 observations) showed PCCs reporting in their Annual Reports on either incidence or performance in relation to VAWG. We then scored whether the PCCs were performing their gender equality duties in either a strong or weak manner.



We found that 45% of PCCs had a strong focus on their equalities duties. We next examined whether the operation of these rules about gender was associated with the prioritization of VAWG in the PCC policy priorities (see Table 1).

*Table 1 about here*

Table 1 shows that, where PCCs had a weak gender equality focus, just over a third prioritized VAWG in their Plan; in contrast, nearly two thirds of the PCCs with a strong gender equality focus, had VAWG as a priority. While our small N means we are not looking to establish the statistical significance of this relationship, we note that the odds of a PCC without a strong gender equality focus prioritizing VAWG is .66 whereas the odds of a PCC with a strong gender equality focus prioritizing VAWG is 1.5. Therefore the relative odds are 2.3, meaning that where a PCC has a strong gender equality focus they are over twice as likely to prioritize VAWG.

### **Gendered Actors Working with Rules**

Next we can examine whether there is a link between the gender of PCCs, and other actors in the PCCs' elite network, and a focus on the gendered crimes associated with VAWG. Here the highly gendered nature of policing is apparent. Only 6 PCCs (14%) were female following the 2012 elections, providing 18 observations (across the 3 years) of the priorities of a female PCC.<sup>ii</sup> Where deputies were appointed only 24 of the 63 (38%) deputies are female; and 24 observations out of the 123 show the presence of a female Chief Constable (20%). Despite the number of female PCCs being so small, it is possible to see a difference in how female PCCs prioritized VAWG in Table 2.

*Table 2 about here*

The findings in Table 2 show that the odds of female PCCs prioritizing a focus on VAWGG in their Police and Crime Plan was 1.6, compared with the odds of male PCCs prioritizing a focus on this area of .9. The relative odds (female:male) are 1.8 suggesting that female PCCs were nearly twice as likely to make this issue as a priority.

Next we examined whether having a female actor in the PCC elite network (comprising the PCC, the Deputy and the Chief Constable) might be linked to giving a priority focus to VAWG. Nearly half (48%) of PCC areas had a female in *one* of these senior roles over the three year period. However, demonstrating the highly gendered nature of the policing arena, only 6 of the 123 observations showed more than one female actor present at any one time within the elite network of the PCC, making it impossible to examine this proposition fully.

## Assessing the Relative Strength of Relationships

Following on from the analysis of each of the institutional variables above, we used binary logistical analysis to examine the relative likelihood of a PCC having prioritized VAWG in relation to : the existence of a strong focus on equalities duties, and the gender of the PCC (Table 3 below). We also included in this analysis whether the PCC was from an established party (rather than an independent). We wanted to control for party effects because both main political parties (Labour and Conservative) had strong policy commitments at the national level regarding VAWG.

*Table 3 about here*

This analysis shows that, where gender equality duties are fully exploited, the PCC is 2.4 times as likely to prioritize gendered crime in the Plan (exemplified here by a focus on VAWG), all other factors being held constant. Female Commissioners are twice as likely as their male counterparts to make VAWG a policy priority, even holding party affiliation and gender equality capacity constant. We also found that, holding all other variables constant, commissioners from established parties were just 1.2 times as likely as independent Commissioners (who have no such party discipline) to prioritize VAWG. We also checked the strength of these associations whilst controlling for the VAWG conviction rate in each PCC area (to reflect the prevalence of relevant crimes). However, including this control did not change the direction of the effect of the institutional associations we identified in our analysis.

## Conclusions

This article argues that the understanding of how and when gender equality reform gets enacted is enhanced through an examination of actors and institutions at the municipal level. In so doing we address a gap in the literature, which has tended to focus on the international and national level, with some work on states and provinces in federal systems. Despite international norms and 'higher' level policy frameworks, key decisions about gender equality reform are made at the local or municipal level. Whether gender equality makes it on to crowded local policy agendas, which are shaped by local conditions and resource constraints, is important in explaining policy outcomes. We argue that this is particularly important when looking at status based policies (like VAWG), given that other research points to the role played by critical actors with executive powers in deciding whether or not to prioritize reforms. Focusing on local level executive actors, we examine how and why local policy prioritization in favor of VAWG varies. In explaining variation in outcomes, our analysis shows the importance of (a) the gender of executive actors, and (b) the way in which actors interpret 'rules about gender', regardless of their own gender.

The findings are based on the analysis of the policy prioritization of VAWG among forty one police and crime commissioners in England and Wales over a three year period. These findings demonstrate variability in the prioritization of VAWG policies at the local level, despite the uniform pressure for reform at the national level and local lobbying by civil society actors prior to their election. We find that the likelihood of this prioritization is linked to actors' own gender, with female PCCs being twice as likely to prioritize VAWG. Prioritizing VAWG on local policy agendas is also linked to the ways in which PCCs engage with elements of the institutional framework, specifically institutional rules associated with gender equality duties. Those PCCs who adopt a more expansive interpretation of their gender equality duties were 2.4 times more likely to prioritize VAWG in their annual policy plan. We find that policy prioritization has a weaker association with other factors such as membership of political parties, with PCCs from established parties just 1.2 times more likely than independent PCCs to make VAWG a policy priority.

Our future research will complement the quantitative work presented in this article through qualitative work with a sample of PCC areas (building on Gains and Lowndes, 2016), which will allow us to investigate how the factors we have highlighted here play out in specific localities. This will build a better understanding of how VAWG policy is influenced by PCCs' own gender and their interpretation of the institutional rules that govern equalities duties. Rather than using a simple male/female measure of PCCs' gender, qualitative methods will enable research into more masculine or feminine styles of leadership, which may not map on to sex or socially ascribed gender (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Qualitative methods will also enable us to study the ways in which apparently gender-neutral institutional rules can also shape political behavior in gendered ways (e.g. conventions governing electoral campaigning or media presence). Interviews, observations and ethnographies provide the most appropriate methods for investigating the role of informal institutional rules, which are not easily captured by quantitative indicators. We know from the emerging literature that informal conventions serve in many instances to subvert or undermine formal rules about gender equality (Lowndes and Roberts, 2013; Lowndes, 2014; Waylen, 2017). As Chappell and Mackay (2017) argue: "Finding the right method to 'see' informal institutions is essential'. This is the next challenge for our research.

Recognizing the heterogeneity of gender equality policies, we have argued for an appreciation of how institutional arrangements at the *local* level may shape reform in the case of status policies, especially when this is the level at which key executive actors sit. This focus on the local level is important for three reasons. First, public policy involves institutional frameworks at multiple levels, which are nested together in different ways ('higher' levels may shape 'lower' levels to varying

degrees, with bottom-up effects too). Second, it is at the local level that individual actors interpret institutional rules, adapting them to fit 'cases' and contexts. Third, this interpretive process is a key source of institutional change, which may operate to secure gender equality reform (through local adaptations or elaborations) or to undermine it (through the neglect or dilution of new rules). In short, a focus on the local level can extend and deepen our analysis of why gender equality reforms succeed or fail in gaining traction. Such a focus can also inform policy to support gender equality reform, illuminating the importance of local level interventions not just in civil society but also within the institutions of governance and public administration. While we recognize that different systems of local governance endow decision makers with varying levels of autonomy, our purpose is to draw attention to the potential significance of local actors and institutions in securing (or blocking) gender equality reforms. Our findings in respect of police governance in England and Wales cannot be generalized to all settings in which status based gender equality reforms are locally shaped; however, they provide a reference point for further research in other jurisdictions (and on other status policies like women's health or reproductive rights) by showing how theoretical propositions can be generated and how key variables can be operationalized and measured. Testing whether our findings hold in other contexts will help build a fuller picture of the role of local actors and local institutions in framing gender equality policies.

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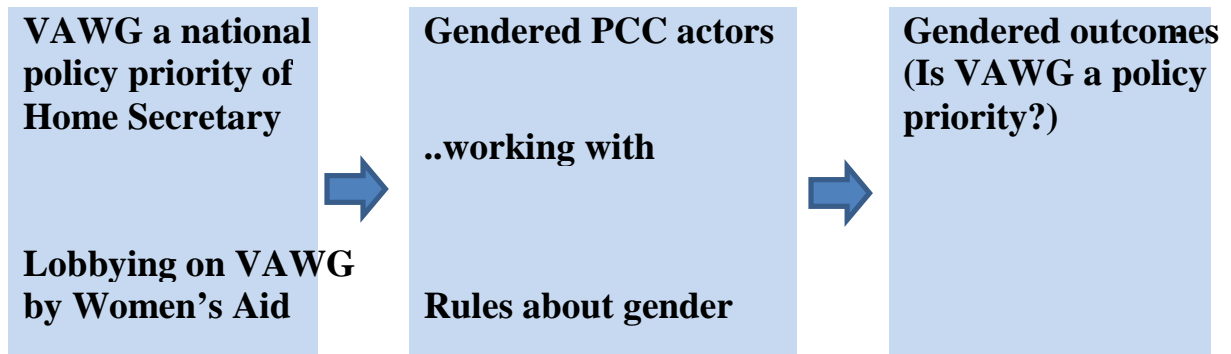
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**Figure 1: Relationship Between Gendered Policy Stimuli, Actors, Rules and Outcomes**



**Key:**  **Potential to support or impede gendered outcomes**

**Table 1: Cross-tabulation of PCCs with a Strong Focus on Gender Equality Duties with PCCs giving VAWG Priority in Police and Crime Plan**

			VAWG a priority Police and Crime Plan		Total
			No	Yes	
Strong focus on gender equality?	No	Count	41	27	68
		%	60.3%	39.7%	100.0%
	Yes	Count	22	33	55
		%	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	63	60	123
		%	51.2%	48.8%	100.0%

**Table 2: Cross-tabulation of Gender of PCCs with PCCs giving VAWG priority in Police and Crime Plan**

		VAWG a priority in Police and Crime Plan		Total
		No	Yes	
Male PCCs	Count	56	49	105
	%	53.3%	46.7%	100.0%
Female PCCs	Count	7	11	18
	%	38.9%	61.1%	100.0%
Total		63	60	123
		51.2%	48.8%	100.0%

**Table 3: Factors associated with VAWG as a priority focus in Police and Crime Plan**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Strong gender equality focus	.866	.375	5.324	1	.021	2.378
Established party Candidate	.202	.414	.238	1	.625	1.224
Female PCC	.709	.542	1.717	1	.190	2.033
Constant	-.683	.412	2.746	1	.097	.505

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> In order to control for our dependent variable (having a priority focus on VAWGG) being influenced by the level of VAWG in each PCC area, we created a control variable derived from Crown Prosecution Service statistics on the number of VAWG convictions (Crown Prosecution Service, 2013) per 1,000 population in each Police and Crime Commissioner area (Office of National Statistics, Dec 2013). This showed that 17 (42%) PCC areas had a VAWG conviction rate below 1 per 1,000 population and 24 (59%) had a rate above 1 per 1,000 population. From this we created a binary variable of above 1/1,000 and below 1/1,000 and added this to the binary logistical regression model reported in findings below.

<sup>ii</sup> The 2016 elections saw an increase in the number of female PCCs by just one, to seven.